What We Were Doing When We Were Interrupted

By Lamar Alexander

Lamar Alexander was nominated as U.S. Secretary of Education by President Bush in January of 1991 and was unanimously confirmed by the Senate in March. Immediately before taking office as ED Secretary, Alexander was president of the University of Tennessee, a position he had held since July 1988. He served as governor of Tennessee from 1979 to 1987. As chairman of the National Governors' Association, he led the 50-state education survey, Time for Results. *In 1988 the Education Commission of the States gave him the James B. Conant Award for "distinguished national leadership in education."*

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When the dust settles and the history books are written, President George Bush's leadership in education will be recognized as among his most significant and lasting contributions.

My definition of presidential leadership is the one George Reedy, Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, used in his book, *Twilight of the Presidency*. Reedy said that a President, aside from his responsibilities as commander in chief, should do three things: 1) see a few urgent needs, 2) develop a strategy to meet each of those needs, and 3) persuade at least half the people that he is right.

By this standard, President Bush did for education what a President can uniquely do: He helped to set a national agenda and make things happen. Because he did this for the most part in bipartisan partnership with the nation's governors, the agenda he has helped to set will be the American education agenda for the rest of this century.

More Was Going on Than You Thought

That agenda begins with the six National Education Goals, established in 1989 in Charlottesville by the President and all of the governors. Next, in April 1991, came the America 2000 strategy to mobilize the country, community by community, toward meeting those goals. By December 1992, more than 2,700 communities in every state were working together on the goals in the monthly America 2000 Satellite TV Town Meetings.

In addition to the America 2000 community effort, the President's agenda included a series of truly radical initiatives designed to create a framework within which parents, business leaders, teachers, and others within the community can more easily change the schools to help them fit today's families. These initiatives were: 1) a new set of national standards in core curriculum subjects, including science, history, English, geography, arts, civics, and foreign languages (math already was done); 2) a voluntary national examination system geared to those new standards; 3) a new generation of thousands of start-from-scratch, "break-the-mold," or charter schools; 4) giving teachers more autonomy and flexibility in their classrooms by waiving federal rules and regulations; and 5) a GI Bill for Children to give middle- and low-income families $1,000 scholarships to spend at any lawfully operated school of their choice, giving those parents more of the same choices wealthy parents already have.

An Agenda for the Rest of the Century

This agenda will not disappear with the arrival of a new Administration. President-elect Clinton helped write the National Education Goals. A bipartisan National Education Goals Panel of governors, members of Congress, and Administration officials has been created to monitor progress toward the goals until the year 2000. Forty-four states, including Arkansas, have created their own America 2000 state efforts. The goals panel will continue the monthly America 2000 Satellite Town Meetings. The America 2000 Coalition of more than 80 nonprofit organizations and business groups from bankers to nurses to the Boy and Girl Scouts has been formed to help communities succeed.

Seven task forces, created to develop the new national academic standards, are funded and are scheduled to complete their work by 1994-95. States and the private sector, stimulated by the goals panel, already are working on new performance-based achievement tests geared to the standards. The New American Schools Development Corporation has raised

$50 million to fund 11 design teams who will help communities create break-the-mold schools; more than 200 more design teams that were not funded have announced their intention to continue their work. California and Minnesota have passed charter schools legislation. Charter school initiatives have been or will be introduced in Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, and Tennessee.

Congress did not approve the President's proposal to relieve the inflexibility of federal rules on classroom teachers, but it almost certainly will do so in 1993. In the meantime, states such as Ohio and Texas have moved ahead of the federal government in getting government off the backs of teachers. Neither did Congress approve the President's GI Bill for Children, but the idea remains powerful, even inevitable, for it commands 70% support in public opinion surveys. Giving tax dollars to parents instead of to schools as a way to change schools and help pay for the changes will be hard to suppress permanently.

Finally, federal spending and program priorities have been rearranged to focus on the National Education Goals and the President's larger agenda for change. For example, Head Start is one of the most powerful aids to Goal One, that all children should arrive at school ready to learn. As a result, during the four Bush years, funding for Head Start more than doubled, making the program available to all eligible 4-year-olds whose parents want them to participate. Two billion dollars in federal funding were refocused on math and science, especially teacher training, a critical element in helping reach the higher standards envisioned by Goals 3 and 4. A new $100 billion, five-year Higher Education Act increased to record levels the number of grants and loans available to college students and the funding for them. These grants and loans help support Goal 5 workforce training objectives.

Congress did not approve the President's proposal for large new increases in federal spending that would have supported his agenda for change. The President had recommended spending more than a half-billion dollars during the next three years to help communities retool the first 535 "break-the-mold" schools. He also proposed a half-billion dollars to begin giving federal scholarships to parents under the GI Bill for Children. Ironically, those two programs – for "break-the-mold schools" and the GI Bill for Children – were the largest new proposals for federal spending to help local schools since 1965, when the Chapter 1 program began. This could have been the beginning of two entirely new long-term methods of using federal funds to help pay for

The New Congress

In 1993 Congress will be considering the five-year renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In plain English, this means that Congress will be setting federal rules that will govern 110,000 local schools until the end of the century.

In order to do that wisely, here is what I believe a member of Congress should vote for:

- Support for a new generation of American schools. School reform has been piecemeal. Communities need to begin comprehensive reforms in education, including the development and implementation of thousands of "break-the-mold" or charter schools.
- World-class standards and voluntary national tests. Setting goals for performance in education is essential to the reform of education. Developing world-class standards of achievement in core subject areas, and encouraging voluntary national examinations to determine progress in reaching these standards, will be essential to reaching the National Goals for Education.
- Cutting red tape – getting government off the backs of teachers and principals. This includes developing a broad waiver authority for the U.S. Secretary of Education, as well as providing flexibility in federal rules and regulations to states and localities in exchange for high program performance and accountability.
- New options for teacher training and certification. Educational reform will not happen without the outstanding teaching, leadership, and support of our nation's teachers. Retraining should be available to teachers and school leaders to update subject knowledge to meet the highest standards, as well as to increase administrative expertise in facilitating reform.
- Giving families more choices of all schools. Choice is a key component of educational reform. Every parent and child in the United States should have more educational options open to them. The GI Bill for Children would provide additional funds to give middle- and low-income families more of the same choices of all schools that wealthier families already have.
- Encouraging the private sector to help improve schools. The rich, creative, American private sector is constantly at work helping to create the best colleges and universities in the world. It should be just as hard at work for our schools.

local schools, namely, funds to help redesign and retool thousands of New American Schools and funds to give hundreds of thousands of families dollars to spend at schools that serve the children who need help the most. Yet, ironically, these two proposals (which were supported in Congress by conservatives) were defeated by those who insist that what schools mainly need is more money from the federal government! The problem seemed to be that the new federal money threatened to bring with it more change than those in charge of our schools could stomach. Even without enactment of these two proposals, federal spending for education during the Bush presidency increased more rapidly than state and local spending. And in 1992, President Bush advocated more new federal discretionary dollars to go into the relatively tiny Education Department than into any other department.

More Change Than Those in Charge Could Stomach

Whether this much change really is necessary is still – 10 years after *A Nation at Risk* – the central issue before us. On one side are those who believe that polite changes in the existing structure plus a lot more money will do most of what needs to be done in education. The view of President Bush, most governors of both political parties, and a growing number of Americans is that we must construct an entirely new and radically different education system over time – as well as rethink community and family responsibilities toward children – if those children are to be able to learn enough to live, work, and compete in the world the way it is today and will be tomorrow.

That difference of opinion crystallizes the issue that is at the core of most of the school debate: Who shall have control? For example, creating break-the-mold schools transfers more control of school structure, standards, and policy to the community at large. So does the process of setting national academic standards and examinations geared to those standards. The 541 organizations in Washington with "education" in their names have thus far persuaded Congress not to transfer to classroom teachers more control over the spending of federal dollars. To be more precise, the president of the National Education Association in a National Public Radio debate refused to go with me to ask Congress to give his own teacher-members more freedom to spend federal dollars in the way they think best helps children in their classrooms.

The biggest control arguments of all are whether to involve private companies in the management of some schools or school functions, and whether to transfer to parents more control of the school their child

attends. All of these efforts would restrict the control now enjoyed by unions, government bureaucracies, local education monopolies, Congress, Congressional staff aides, and the 541 lobbying groups in Washington. The proposed shifts of control would generally give more power to parents, classroom teachers, community groups, the private sector, and citizens at large. Today's school debate is primarily about who should have control of an enterprise that now spends more than the nation does on defense, and that most Americans believe has more to do with our future than any other enterprise: the education of our children.

These proposed changes of control would produce truly wrenching changes in the American system of education. That is why the prospect of these changes produced enormous resistance within the education community, especially during the 1992 presidential elections. It had become obvious that if the President were re-elected, he would have insisted on his agenda during the 1993 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Because of the respect Americans generally have for their educators, this resistance within the education community created widespread skepticism about the President's policies within the community at large. So, despite the fact that rhetoric for "real change" was a dominant theme in the 1992 elections, the specific education changes advocated by the President turned out to be more change than most Americans were comfortable with. About the only thing all those arguing seemed to agree upon was that these changes, if they were enacted, would produce schools that by the end of the decade would only faintly resemble the schools we have today.

To understand more fully why we still believe such radical changes are necessary, how and where the movement to cause these changes began, and where it had advanced when the voters interrupted the President in November 1992, it is useful to step back to the early 1980s and to the publication of *A Nation At Risk*.

A Nation at Risk: 1983

In 1980 I was governor of Tennessee. I recall the Democratic legislative leaders coming to my office to talk about their resolution creating a commission to look at our state's education system.

I asked them, "Will this be just another resolution and commission, or will we take this seriously and appoint the best people and do what they say we need done?"

We agreed that it was time for a serious look at education. Together we appointed a bipartisan commission of the state's most outstanding citizens and legislators. One year later, this commission produced a sweeping blueprint for change. Based upon that work, in January 1983 I proposed a 10-point "Better Schools Program."

It was into this environment that the U.S. Education Department's report, *A Nation At Risk*, appeared in March 1983. The report triggered a national alarm about what our children knew and were able to do. I know that in our state the report helped galvanize support for more change in our schools, as well as our attitudes, than most observers had thought was possible.

The elements of Tennessee's "Better Schools Program" were like those that began to appear in state after state: a focus on basic skills and the core curriculum, new kinds of assessments so we could know what children were learning, computers in the schools, alternative schools for disruptive children, Governor's Schools in the summer for gifted children, across-the-board teacher pay raises as well as a new career ladder to pay teachers more for teaching well, higher admissions standards at universities, centers and chairs of excellence at the universities, expansion of community colleges and new focus on workforce skills, and tax increases to pay the bill for the new initiatives.

The National Education Association fiercely opposed the career ladder (although the American Federation of Teachers was open to it). I vetoed all teacher pay raises one year and promised to veto such raises every year in order to force passage of the career ladder. For two years, I spent more than half my time working to enact these legislative reforms. It was my first lesson in how real change in the education system can be difficult even for a single-minded governor.

The Governors' Year of Education: "Time for Results"

Governors in almost every state were learning the same lessons. By 1985-86, interest in school reform had grown so that the nation's governors did something they never had done before: They devoted an entire year to a single subject – education. I was chairman of the National Governors' Association that year. Bill Clinton of Arkansas was vice-chairman. All of us had become convinced that, in the midst of a world of change, American education seemed to be stepping forward briskly in the same old ruts. So we sought to change the agenda.

The agenda of the Seventies had been mostly desegregation and more money. The agenda that the governors sought to make the national edu-

cation agenda of the future is reflected in the following seven questions that we asked:

1. Why not pay teachers more for teaching well?
2. What can be done to attract, train, and reward excellent school leaders?
3. Why not let parents choose the schools their children attend?
4. Aren't there ways to help poor children with weak preparation to succeed in school?
5. Why are expensive school buildings closed half the year when children are behind in their studies and many classrooms are overcrowded?
6. Why shouldn't schools use the newest technologies for learning?
7. How much are college students really learning?

The governors divided into seven task forces to consider these questions. We issued our answers and recommendations in 1986, calling it "Time for Results: The 1991 Report," because we pledged to follow the progress on answering those seven questions for five years. I said at the time, and the major premise of the report was, "The Governors are ready for some old-fashioned horse trading. We'll regulate less if schools and school districts will produce better results."

Leadership: Setting the Agenda, Making Things Happen

Governors began to discover that if they set a limited education agenda, presented their arguments in a compelling way, and leaned into it with everything they had for as long as they were in office, they could wear everyone else out. They also found that governors, with the exception of a few business people like Ross Perot in Texas, were really the only individuals with sufficient authority to build coalitions powerful enough to challenge the education establishment, which was at first surprised by and then generally resistant to many of the changes that the governors and business leaders proposed.

By the time of the 1988 presidential election, almost every governor was describing himself or herself as an "education governor." State spending for elementary and secondary education had nearly doubled during the previous decade. George Bush announced in the midst of his campaign that he intended to be the "Education President."

In 1988 George Bush was elected President. (I had become president of the University of Tennessee.) Shortly after his election, during a meeting of university presidents, I remember the President asking,

"If we have the best colleges, why not the best schools?" In that meeting we discussed the possibility of an education summit. I suggested keeping the summit small, limiting it to the chief executives of our nation: the President and the governors. I also reminded the President of George Reedy's advice about seeing a few urgent needs, developing strategies to reach them, and working hard to persuade at least half the people that he is right.

Reedy's formula was the kind of agenda-setting leadership the governors had been practicing during the 1980s as they worked through state-by-state solutions to the seven questions we had asked ourselves in "Time for Results." It would become the basis for the same kind of leadership when in October 1989 the governors and the President committed themselves to six ambitious National Education Goals and to trying to move the country toward them by the year 2000.

The Summit and the National Education Goals

The summit at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville went remarkably well. Terry Branstad of Iowa, the Chairman of the Governors' Council that year, appointed Governor Clinton of Arkansas and Governor Carroll Campbell of South Carolina to lead the effort. Working with the President's representatives, they came up with the first National Education Goals. The goals were bipartisan, comprehensive, and direct. They spoke to students of all ages and to issues inside and outside the classroom. The governors pledged to go home and go to work moving their states toward the goals.

The goals declared that, by the year 2000:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
3. American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

It could be said that, after a decade of unprecedented school reform, America backed into its goals for the reforms. At the beginning of the 1980s we would have done well to consider guitarist Chet Atkins' advice, "In this life you have to be mighty careful where you aim because you're likely to get there." We finally took the advice, but only after going in circles for a while.

America 2000

I was president of the University of Tennessee in December 1990 when the President telephoned to ask me to be U.S. Education Secretary. To be specific, I was chairing a fairly arcane session on assessment (all sessions on assessment are, to put it charitably, arcane) at Alex Haley's farm when the phone started ringing. First it was John Sununu. Then it was Howard Baker, to whom Sununu had talked. Then the President was on the line asking if I would take the job.

Having had a few hours to collect my thoughts, I asked the President two questions: "First, may I develop a strategy to help the country reach the six National Education Goals and would you then either change or approve the strategy, but at least give me my marching orders? Second, may I then, subject to your OK, recruit a team of men and women capable of carrying out such an ambitious undertaking?" The President said yes to both questions.

So on January 16, 1991, the same night the United States began bombing Baghdad, a few of us met in the Tennessee mountains to consider how the federal government could, in partnership with the governors, accelerate America's effort to reach the National Education Goals by the year 2000. The group included, among others, former Xerox Chairman David Kearns, Vanderbilt Professor Chester (Checker) Finn, former New Jersey Education Commissioner Saul Cooperman, Denis Doyle, and University of Tennessee vice-presidents Michael Nettles and John Rudley.

That process continued during the next several weeks and involved dozens of others – for example, Columbia University Professor Diane Ravitch, ALCOA Chief Executive Officer Paul O'Neill – until March 18, when the U.S. Senate confirmed my nomination. On March 19 our proposal for an America 2000 strategy was at the White House. On March 21 we met with President Bush, and on April 18 he presented his strategy to the nation at a special East Room ceremony.

Not only did the President keep his promise to approve a strategy quickly, he allowed me to recruit a really first-class "President's education team" to carry out the strategy, and in some cases he participated in the recruiting. David Kearns' willingness to come to the Education Department as deputy secretary signaled a seriousness of purpose that helped to attract others, such as Diane Ravitch to head research, Carolynn Reid-Wallace from City University of New York to head postsecondary activities, and IBM executive Don Laidlaw for human resources and management. Washington, D.C., attorney Jeff Martin became general counsel; White House Director of Cabinet Affairs Steven Danzansky came as chief of staff; and Vanderbilt University Associate Vice-Chancellor for News and Public Affairs Leslye Arsht became director of communications. Former Labor Secretary Ann McLaughlin was elected president of the private New American Schools Development Corporation. Former U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Ed Donley founded and chaired the nonprofit America 2000 Coalition.

In addition, we found a large number of talented men and women already working at ED who liked the boldness of what we were planning and who especially liked all the presidential attention. Once the President mistakenly referred to the Education Department as "the Department of Energy." He wasn't that wrong. Lights at the department were burning most nights until 10 p.m. as we focused on how to mobilize such a huge, diverse country toward such ambitious goals.

Community by Community

The America 2000 strategy, precisely defined, is a partnership between the President and the governors to help America move community-by-community toward the six National Education Goals by the year 2000. The President was determined that the strategy would be as bipartisan as the formulation of the goals themselves had been. Democratic Governor Donald Schaefer of Maryland endorsed America 2000 the day it was announced. The President and Mrs. Bush traveled to Grand Junction, Colorado, in June 1991 to help Roy Romer, the chairman of the Democratic Governors Association, kick off Colorado 2000, the first of 44 such state efforts. I recall Democratic Governor Ben Nelson of Nebraska, an enthusiastic architect of Omaha and Nebraska 2000, rising at the governors' meeting with the President at the White House in February 1991 and saying, "Mr. President, when you talk about America 2000 please remember to refer to it as a partnership with all the governors, not just as your program."

The President asked every community to become an America 2000 community by doing four things:

1. Adopt the six National Education Goals.
2. Develop a communitywide strategy to achieve them.
3. Design a report card to measure results.
4. Plan for and support a New American School

By December 1991 more than 2,300 communities were working on this challenge. More than 2,700 communities were meeting monthly in the America 2000 Satellite TV Town Meeting.

Some of the President's other proposals for change – notably giving families more choices of all schools, including private schools – proved to be controversial but did not interfere with the America 2000 community efforts. Teachers were involved in every community effort. For example, the Minnesota Education Association joined the Minnesota Business Council and Governor Arne Carlson in launching Minnesota 2000. "We'll all get on the train and have these arguments while we're moving down the tracks," I would tell people. "It won't help the children if we stand around in the train station arguing." For the most part, most people got on the train; and the trains began to move slowly down several tracks at once.

There are four broad tracks to America 2000:

1. For today's students: better and more accountable schools.
2. For tomorrow's students: a new generation of break-the-mold New American Schools.
3. For the rest of us (yesterday's students/today's work force): a nation of students.
4. Communities where learning can happen.

I recall a discussion in the fall of 1991 with one school board member in New Hampshire who said, "I'm disappointed in America 2000. There are not enough details about what to do."

A Concord principal to whom I told this story later in the day said, "That's exactly why America 2000 will work. It leaves to the communities and the teachers the opportunity to fill in the details. It creates a framework within which we all can operate; sometimes that is the hardest thing to do for ourselves."

More Consensus Than Meets the Eye

The acrimony from teachers unions and others over proposals for school choice and private-sector involvement tended to obscure the fact

that there had developed a strikingly broad consensus about many of the underlying issues on school reform. At least, this consensus existed outside Washington, D.C.

There was consensus about Problem Number One: Too many people still believed, "The nation's at risk, but I'm OK." There also was growing consensus among those who participated in the reforms of the Eighties that, in retrospect, the reforms looked too timid, too slow, and very expensive given the (lack of) results.

There seemed also to be consensus about why schools needed to change. First, standards were higher. Today's auto workers have to know and be able to do more than yesterday's. Governor Romer often spoke of Americans prepared to pole vault 15 feet with bamboo poles at a time when the rest of the world is jumping 19 feet with fiberglass poles. Second, children are growing up differently. It is harder today to be a teacher, a student, or a parent. Families and communities and schools are unprepared for this and are literally overwhelmed. Third, the schools themselves are designed for our great-grandparents' times – out-of-date, literally in a time warp, too often stymieing teachers and boring children. In inner cities, where parents work until 6 p.m., we still send children home at 3 p.m. to empty houses and give teachers summer vacations to bring in the crops. And fourth, all of us of all ages need to go back to school. Most of us cannot do a child's seventh-grade math homework.

In the 101 communities I visited during my last 18 months in office, I found some other generally held working assumptions:

1. *Made in Washington is not the solution.* Federal recipe books just don't help children in distant classrooms. Congress itself is so dominated by Washington interest groups and so removed from classrooms that its solutions are not much help and sometimes get in the way.

2. "*It takes an entire community to educate one child.*" This African proverb is the favorite motto for America 2000 community efforts. I never visited a classroom that was more dangerous than the community in which it existed.

3. *All children can reach reasonably high learning standards.* Most Americans, deep down, don't really believe this; but the most inspiring efforts in American education today are teachers trying to prove that it is true.

4. *Changes in technology will drive many other needed changes.* One hundred years after the invention of the telephone, most teachers do not have easy access to one. At countless schools, I have been inspired

by dedicated teachers; but I often left feeling they had been issued a Model T Ford to compete in the Indianapolis 500.

5. *We are wasting assets and hurting children when we close school buildings*. Almost all break-the-mold school designs have schools open all day, all week, all year. Families choose the times and places and schools their children will attend; the school fits the needs of the family.

Trains Moving Down the Track

The short report card about progress along the new education agenda would say:

1. *The National Education Goals*. Don't underestimate them. As Arianne Williams, a fourth-grader at the Cog Hill Elementary School, said at the kickoff of New Orleans 2000, "These are not the President's goals, these are not the governor's goals, they are the nation's goals."

2. *The America 2000 community effort*. Forty-four states, 2,300 communities working to reach the goals; 2,700 communities meeting monthly in the Satellite TV Town Meeting.

3. *New National Standards by 1994-95*. The task forces are organized and funded. The National Goals Panel now includes members of Congress in its consensus about the need for standards. This will be the most comprehensive rethinking ever of what we teach.

4. *A Voluntary National Examination System*. We've not made as much progress here; but, nevertheless, the system is inevitable. No test maker who wants to stay in business will ignore the new standards; and the Goals Panel will let teachers, school boards, and parents know whether the new tests are really geared to the new higher standards.

5. *Break-the-Mold Schools*. Hold your reins tightly. Nothing will be more powerful in the 1990s than state laws and school boards deciding to give teachers and others the opportunity to start from scratch to design completely new schools and academic programs. Watch California, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, New Jersey. The New American Schools Corporation's design teams are working with hundreds of school districts. The private Edison Project is planning 1,000 new schools. "Break-the mold schools" are not a few experimental schools; this is renewing the entire system over time by starting over, thousands of different times.

6. *Getting government off teachers' backs*. States are loosening the rules so teachers can teach. The federal government will catch up soon.

7. *Giving families more choices of all schools*. My prediction: Choice won't even be an issue at the end of the 1990s. Once America designs

thousands of very different new schools and academic programs, we won't *assign* children to them, will we? The schools will *attract* the child. And to make it fair for all families, the federal and state government will have to begin to give scholarships to middle- and low-income families so their children will have more of the same choices wealthy parents do. This new consumer power will help change the schools and pay for the changes.

8. *Involving the private sector in education.* If you are dubious about this, my suggestion is to go to Baltimore, where a courageous superintendent, Walter Amphrey, has hired a private company to help operate nine inner-city public schools. For the same amount of money spent in other Baltimore schools, this public/private partnership is putting two teachers in every classroom, new computer equipment in every school, an individualized education program for every child, and telephones on teachers' desks. And the schools are clean. Why do we use our most creative private-sector minds only when we want to put missiles down smokestacks?

My Education in Public

During the last 18 months I have visited more than 101 communities, in virtually every state. I was in California 20 times. I have received more of an education in this job than I had expected. I am not a professional educator. I became interested in my own education because my parents, who were teachers, and my community valued education. As governor of Tennessee I found that if I wanted to move my state, nothing was more important than improving the schools, colleges, and universities. I next found myself as president of our state university because I did not think Tennessee would succeed without continuing to develop a first-class public university. I felt privileged to be invited by President Bush to be Education Secretary because I agreed with him: If we want to change America, we must change our schools and our attitudes about education.

Most of my time in this job was spent not with politicians but in the schools. You can learn about a community in this way. You can learn a lot about America's future by getting to know its children. I had not expected to find myself at 3 p.m. on a street corner in East Los Angeles with Evelyn Lucero, the principal of Hollenbeck Middle School, watching to discourage gangs from forming as children left school. I did not really know much about the lives of those children until I met them and read their book of poems, "*Adios a La Manana*" ("Farewell to the

Morning"). Every American should have the experience I had watching teachers in P.S. 25 in the Bronx helping children from South America learn about George Washington by reminding them about Simon Bolivar. You should have a chance, as I did, to work with Octavio Visiedo, the Dade County (Miami) superintendent, as he developed his "Project Phoenix" after Hurricane Andrew to create 50 new schools that are the best in the world, including high schools open 20 hours a day, elementary schools in hospitals, schools managed by the private sector – any school with high standards that shows promise of helping children the way children are growing up today.

Education has become America's national worry. Creating the best schools in the world for our children is becoming the movement of the 1990s as civil rights became the movement for the 1960s. Gallup surveys show that Americans rate having the best education system far and away first in importance to our country's next 25 years. Response to this concern is coming from all quarters. The Business Roundtable executives have committed to 10 years of priority for our schools. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is involved in at least 1,000 communities with America 2000 community efforts. The nation's math teachers have taught the country how to create higher standards in essential subjects. The President of the United States invited the New American Schools Development Corporation Board to Camp David for its first meeting. The Advertising Council has launched a campaign to remind us to "Keep the Promise." Ohio jelly maker Tim Smucker told me, "Not one person turned me down when I asked them to be part of Orrville 2000, and I have asked 400 different people."

Each day since the opening of school this fall, I have presented an "A-Plus for Breaking the Mold" award to some school or community that is taking risks to help children. I have done this because I am convinced that by the time our fifth-graders, the Class of 2000, are seniors, our schools should be as different as the children themselves will be. If we want to paint a picture of what America itself will look like in the year 2000, the most accurate picture will be a picture of those schools and those children.